

ancient intelligence I read behind those eyes frightened me to this very day. I could not keep her gaze for long. I stepped carefully back from the cage, and we continued our search.

We walked the length of the hall, discovering animals locked within most of those holding pens. We saw lions, jaguars, tigers, panthers, cougars, mountain lions, and a lynx. There were undoubtedly some animals which we had been unable to see, who remained hidden back somewhere inside their pens.

The animals were fantastic in their own right, but they paled in comparison with some of the unexplainably strange sights to be seen within those cages. Just writing of these strange things we saw would easily comprise another full letter, but let it suffice to say here that in many cases the contents of those cages were not of this world as we know it. A brown spotted lynx rested by a mirror made of water, hovering suspended, tiny waves rippling across its surface. A tiger guarded a rug of fantastic colors beyond the ability of any artist to reproduce. Swirling vortexes of ruby red and metallic blue led to realms of which even dreams cannot speak. But of these things I shall write no more. For they have since populated my mind with both fantastic and terrible dreams, and I have no doubt now that mankind understands precious little about this immensely vast universe. Our wisdom is like unto a single drop of water in a vast ocean. Perhaps this is as it was meant to be.

At the far end of the hall was a dusty and ancient painting of a female dressed in Greek clothing who Kira informed me must have been Polyhymnia, the patron Muse of the hall. Who or what was it that took care of the fantastic assortment of animals? They surely could not have survived for long without food and care?

"We've got to get out of this place," Corbin whispered, his voice cracking, as though afraid he might be overheard by Polyhymnia herself.

Kira, though, perhaps feeling some measure of her Greek roots welling up within, announced that she absolutely had to be allowed more time to explore. Though I was as afraid as either of my friends, I could not help but recognize the once in

a lifetime opportunity which had presented itself. This sanctuary, the *Sanctuary of Polyhymnia*, as I would later decide to call it, was filled with some of the most fantastic visual images ever seen on this Earth. I feared that I lacked the skill to accurately portray the fantastic sights waiting within those holding cages, but if I did not at least try to capture them on canvas, I would never be able to live with myself. Even a modest rendition of those incredible sights would secure me international, even historical, fame as one of the greatest of artists of all-time. I knew what had to be done. Such things are worth risking one's life for. If only... if only it had been my life alone which I was risking...

So while Kira and her hesitant companion Corbin explored the hall in greater depth, I returned to the cage of the black panther, lured her out of the darkness with a few kind words, and began to sketch.

I don't know for certain what it was; the mood, the fear heightening my senses, or my vision of grandeur which guided my pencil, but there was no question that something was guiding my hand, and in a very short time I was about to complete my sketch. Even before I had finished, I was looking down upon my work with unabashed awe, for I knew that I was on the verge of completing the greatest sketch of my life. If only I could have stopped then, so close to the brink. But my hand continued with the final lines of my masterpiece. Just as I finished, I detected an almost imperceptible hum, which preceded a dull flash of rainbow colors, and I knew, just knew, that the barrier had gone down, permanently.

The panther knew it too. I read the recognition in those scheming emerald orbs that very instant. I didn't have time to do anything; no time to think, step back, or even shield myself. The panther moved so fast it was a blur. As it leapt past me it swiped my arms with its lethally sharp claws. A brief instant of pain; then ghostly rivers of dimly glowing blood were running down my arm, pooling on the floor at my feet. Before I even had time to gasp in pain, the panther was past me,